

Proper 10B – July 12, 2015
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; and Mark 6:14-29
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The Prophet

In our [other] first reading appointed for today, we heard from the prophet Amos. And in our gospel, we heard about the gruesome fate of the prophet John the Baptizer, and just how risky the prophetic role of Jesus was becoming. In these lessons, the prophetic role and its risks are laid out. The word “Prophet” comes from the Greek for “spokesperson.” Prophets are people who tell forth—speak out—in the name of something or someone bigger than themselves. Prophets in the Biblical tradition have had the audacity to claim that they speak for God, the Creator of the Universe.

Such prophets, if they’re authentic, are *not* fortune tellers or even fore-tellers. Rather, they are spokespersons or *forth-tellers*—telling forth. When an authentic prophet speaks of something good or bad that may happen in the future, that is said not from some ideology or some kind of divination or crystal ball separate from the actual context of what has been going. Rather, prophets know that peoples’ lives have a way of being consequential; and, any future forecasts they make are fundamentally based on reading the “signs of the times” and being bold enough to tell others what they see whether they will believe them or not. The message of the prophets is Stop, Look and Listen! Listen to history, they cry. Look at the social injustices amongst you, says Amos. Look at your head-in-the-sand religiosity, says Jeremiah. Watch for international treacheries and national power-plays, says Isaiah. Stop, Look and Listen, because it is precisely through these situations that God is speaking a word of warning, of judgment, and a word of command and direction!

In the time of Amos, for example, Israel was quite prosperous, but very corrupt, especially in its urban life. Political corruption, embezzlement, and unjust treatment of poor and foreign people were commonplace. Besides this internal situation, Assyria was a military threat from the North. Israel had itself built up a significant military strength and had made some unsteady alliances. The Israelites looked forward to the day when God would finally come and deliver them from all their afflictions. However, Amos told them that they had better start looking for something else because when the day came, God was going to settle a lot of people’s scores, all right, but the score that would be settled first was with Israel itself. Amos felt compelled to leave his job as a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees to go and speak these signs of the times to those in power, face to face. He warned of impending doom if things didn’t change. He demanded that people realize how close hell was to becoming a sudden and violent reality. With all the anger and love and humility that his faith placed at his command, in the name of the Lord, Amos denounced the political, economic and military presumptions of the leaders, institutions and the people of his day. He also denounced the pseudo-religious attitudes of those in high office who stole religious phrases to decorate and validate crackpot policies. In place of the narrow religion that was so commonplace and which covered so much complacency and evil, Amos laid out the

true worship demanded by God, which would let “justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream [Amos 5:24].”

Now, there is little evidence to suggest that the prophets ever got asked back a second time to dinner; except for John the Baptist, whose head shows up on a platter. Remember also Jeremiah, for example, who showed a clay pot to a crowd of Judeans and told them it represented Judah. Then he smashed it to bits and said that this was more or less what God had in mind to do to them [Jeremiah 19]. And John the Baptist initially appeared on the scene looking and acting very much like one of these prophets from an earlier time, dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey, and shouting to any who would hear that they needed to repent—turn their lives around, get their priorities straight—and prepare the way of the Lord and make a right pathway to God. As Frederick Buechner put it, “The prophets were drunk on God, and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness no one was ever comfortable. With a total lack of tact they roared out against phoniness and corruption wherever they found them. They were the terror of kings and priests.”ⁱ Having said that, the prophets didn’t just rant and rave—they also left room for those in power to break out of their escalating spirals of violence and do the right thing. Of course, that often didn’t happen. Instead, we know that Jeremiah was thrown in a dungeon. Legend has it that Isaiah was sawed in half. And John the Baptist lost his head at Herod’s birthday party from hell, as we see recorded in today’s lengthy digression in Mark’s gospel. It’s not recorded how Amos and the other prophets got theirs.

Finally, no prophet is on record as having asked for the job either. In today’s reading, for example, Amos tells the high priest Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” Jeremiah pled that he was much too young to become a prophet (Jeremiah 1:6). And Moses said that he had never been any good at public speaking, and chances were that no one would listen to him (Exodus 4:10). As Buechner puts it, “Like Abraham Lincoln’s story about the man being ridden out of town on a rail, if it weren’t for the honor of the thing the prophets would all have rather walked.”ⁱⁱ But they couldn’t. Prophets have a quarrel to settle, God’s quarrel with God’s people, a lover’s quarrel, a quarrel they can’t walk away from.

So, who’s on your list of prophets? My list includes, along with the Biblical prophets: Sojourner Truth and Malcolm X, Steven Biko and Fannie Lou Hamer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hannah Arendt, Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela; Rigoberta Menchu and Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Oscar Romero; Leo Tolstoy and Cesar Chavez; Frederick Douglass and Aung San Suu Kyi—all these have been prophets in their day and in their own way. The same Lord also calls *each of us* to do no less than the prophet Micah called his people to do: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God [Micah 6:8].

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 74-75

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 75